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WOMEN'S ROLE IN LOCAL PEACEBUILDING

Recommendations to better support
the work of Palestinian women-led
grassroots organizations



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INTRODUCTION



In April 2021, young Palestinian activist and journalist Muna el-Kurd caught the global attention when she started an international movement with the launch of the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah and tirelessly mobilized online support for families facing eviction from their homes in East Jerusalem. She addressed mainstream media and appeared in front of the UN Human Rights Commission. Other women as well took active part in Sheikh Jarrah's residents' meetings, attended hearing sessions at the Israeli courts, organized to keep a street presence in the neighbourhood and provided refreshments for solidarity activists. Meanwhile, Palestinian women journalists were at the frontline reporting the events, with reports of some of them enduring physical assault and arrest as a consequence.¹

It is not only in Sheikh Jarrah that Palestinian women mobilize for their communities: it also happens all across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and Gaza; and has been ongoing for

decades. The question is why **their work remains largely invisible, they often struggle to access support and resources, and their expertise and hard work rarely translate into official decision-making power or influence.** This paper outlines some of the essential contributions that local Palestinian women peacebuilders are making to their communities and provides recommendations for duty bearers to better support their work.

It should be noted that this paper is not narrowly focused on women engaged in peacebuilding efforts with Israeli counterparts. Rather it defines 'local women peacebuilders' in the broadest sense of the word: as **women who, in the context of the Israeli occupation, respond to crises, deliver services and accelerate peace in their communities.** They tend to work across the peace-development-human rights and humanitarian nexus to serve their communities regardless of the continuously changing circumstances and ongoing challenges.

BACKGROUND



Photo: UN Women/Samar Abu Elouf

In 2000, women peacebuilders were the inspiration and engine behind UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that for the first time in history called for the inclusion of women in matters of war prevention and peacemaking.² While women peacebuilders draw on global legal norms and policies emanating from the Women, Peace and Security agenda to pursue their demands for inclusion in peace and security decision-making, their local peacebuilding efforts have both informed the formation of those policies and further legitimized their call for recognition of their expertise and contributions, and systematic inclusion in the peace and security processes that shape their lives.³ In UNSCR 1325, the generic call for increasing “the role of women” in decision-making is accompanied by the specific call for “Measures that support local women’s peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution” (emphasis added), noted in paragraph 8 of UNSCR 1325. This commitment remains largely unfulfilled 21 years on.⁴

Attention to the issue of women’s participation in peacebuilding has tended to concentrate on the national and international levels. As a result, the contribution of, and the challenges facing, women building peace at the local level have been largely ignored together with the impact of

their involvement on women, their communities and on national-level peace processes. Local civil society organizations, including women’s rights organizations, are frequently at the front line of supporting women’s participation in peacebuilding, but their efforts are also typically overlooked.⁵ Women contribute to peace at the local level in diverse ways. There is extensive literature on women in peacebuilding, which highlights women’s contributions as peace activists, humanitarian workers, educators, life-saving health professionals, academics, facilitators and trainers.⁶

Scholars and historians have noted that Palestinian women have long taken on leading roles in Palestinian society. They are known to have mobilized alongside men in 1917 against the Balfour Declaration, and the first exclusive female organization, the Palestinian Women’s Union, was founded in 1921. Women played a key role in finding ways to survive and provide for their families and communities during and after the 1948 Palestinian Catastrophe or *Nakba*. They have been frontline responders and organizers since the start of the occupation, continually finding new ways to support and rebuild their communities. The First Intifada (starting 1987) is considered a milestone moment in the women’s movement, where women from

all strata of Palestinian society participated and mobilized to protest the occupation. The signing of the Oslo Accords (1993) and the commencement of official state building brought the first opportunities for women to enter formal political bodies and roles but also changed and in some ways scattered women's organizing power.

Some have argued that after 1993, disillusionment with organized politics led most women to adhere to more localized and informal ways of channelling their engagement. Richter-Devroe (2018) has extensively argued that women's everyday informal actions and their very survival on the land within the context of occupation are in fact political acts and have become the way that most women in Palestine "do politics". With few opportunities to find expression through organized Palestinian politics but bearing most of the responsibility for carrying on some form of normality – feeding their families and maintaining a functioning home even as many men struggle to provide, women have been the pillars of what is often referred to as *sumud*.⁷ However, these crucial contributions go largely unrecognized because they do not fit the framework of what most would consider as political.

Those consulted for this paper⁸ describe countless ways in which local women peacebuilders and their organizations have made a difference over the past years. For example, women's protection committees have been established across Area C⁹ in the West Bank to address issues ranging from local service provision (water, education, transportation) to issues around gender-based violence and addressing local tensions and conflict. Numerous other localized CSOs, coalitions and networks have been established and are similarly active in community peacebuilding through advocacy, service provision, facilitating local dialogues and capacity building.

While it is never easy for women to carve out space in local decision-making, this kind of localized organizing and coalition forming has been successful in giving women increased leverage with local actors to push for policy change, access to resources and access to local networks. Through a slow and steady process, some have managed to

build trust and gain influence in their communities in the course of years of engagement. Due to a combination of their persistence and the institution of gender quotas, some women have in recent years been able to gain seats in local councils. Those consulted for this paper mention examples of many of these women defying practices of tribalism and favouritism to tirelessly work and advocate for the most vulnerable and marginalized families in their communities.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the same local women and women-led groups have been able to quickly adapt and play a vital role in the response. Some of the women's protection committees, for example, were able to liaise with donors, private sector and COVID-19 committees to organize emergency supplies. Others came up with innovative ideas to reach women with psychosocial support during this time or started small enterprises to economically support families after many men lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Additionally, during the recent escalations and bombing of Gaza, committees and organizations provided psychosocial support by phone and WhatsApp and organized material support for individuals in greatest need.

A key part of women's work at the local level has also been in resisting and mitigating the effects of the occupation. Particularly documenting violations of the occupation is a key priority for many women and women-led organizations. Women at the grassroots have been coming forward with their stories and linking up with national CSOs or international community presences to document violations like house demolitions, land evictions, internal displacement, denial of access and residency for Jerusalemite women, and the suffering of women in Gaza, including the effects of the recent Gaza escalation. It should be noted that presenting their stories requires a lot of courage and often is not without costs.

All these local efforts and contributions could have had a much more significant impact if women's participation in local peacebuilding was not structurally hampered by a number of significant barriers. Some of the key barriers are outlined below.

Barrier 1 – The Israeli occupation (and lack of concrete international community action)

The occupation and resulting violence are negatively impacting local women peacebuilders, causing ongoing challenges and regular setbacks for their work. Every shred of progress women are able to make for their communities tends to be precarious and at the mercy of the occupying power. For example, women in one community were able to organize donor-funded solar panels to improve local energy supply but the panels were destroyed for reasons that were unclear.

Occupation also limits their movement within and across communities and it causes ongoing worries about their physical safety. Not only are women fearful of random incidents like shootings near checkpoints and settler violence, but they are also fearful of retaliatory actions whenever they speak out about issues they face or witness. Activists, protestors, journalists and even women at the grassroots level who have documented violations, report being physically harassed, arrested and sometimes imprisoned. At least one incident was also reported of a woman who was suddenly threatened with eviction from her home in Hebron after documenting acts of violence.

Local women's organizations try to adapt and respond to every challenge that arises, but they report feeling powerless and frightened in the face of violence of the occupation. For example, during the Gaza escalation in May 2021 which on the Palestinian side resulted in 256 people (23 girls, 43 boys, 40 women and 150 men) being killed,¹⁰ organizations based in the West Bank reported spending nights on the phone with terrified women in Gaza. "Our people are suffering, and we stand helpless. We can respond to issues of domestic violence but not this kind of violence." Meanwhile they were too afraid to move and reach beneficiaries due to hostile treatment at checkpoints and fear of attacks by hostile groups of settlers. All of their activities on the ground were negatively affected during this period. While women locally do what they can to support their communities, it is in these situations of relative powerlessness they look

to the international community for support and protection.

Through the UN Security Council, the international community also has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and implementation of relevant resolutions, including those relating to the Palestinian context. Member States also position themselves as champions of universal human rights, and various UN bodies and mechanisms are mandated to promote universal respect for the protection of human rights. In practice though, Palestinian women have often found that there is support for their rights in theory but an unwillingness to see it through in practical terms. The women informant have taken note of the lack of implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions such as 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002), 1515 (2003) and 2334 (2016). They similarly took note of how Member States voted (or failed to vote) during the [special session of the Human Rights Council](#) following the escalation in Gaza on ensuring respect for international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian territory in which it established an international commission of inquiry. Stronger action from the international community to achieve concrete changes in the situation of occupation were flagged as a number one priority, eclipsing their need for funding in terms of priority level. Specific actions mentioned included: imposing of sanctions on Israel for violations of security council resolutions and international humanitarian law, restriction of arms sales to Israel and/or an arms embargo, adding specific human rights clauses as preconditions in any bilateral agreements with Israel, and business restrictions and boycott of products produced in illegal settlements.

Additionally, women need platforms to share their stories and ensure their experiences at the local level do not remain local secrets. In some cases, women have been able to present testimonies to major platforms, including UN platforms through the support of strong women-led Palestinian organizations. But as they continue to risk their lives by documenting their experiences, they look to the international community to show increased willingness to hear them, support them with getting their messages out and act on them.

Barrier 2 – Lack of decision-making power

Women consulted (a list of key informants who were interviewed for the sake of developing this policy brief is included at the end as well as timeframe of the interviews) for this paper working in various fields observe the same thing: **regardless of how active Palestinian women are at the grassroots level within community groups and organizations, their access to decision-making and participation in political processes remains almost non-existent**, especially at the higher levels. In this context it should be noted that Palestinian leadership has made some laudable efforts to elevate women's roles. For example, Palestine acceded to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without reservations in 2014. The adoption of electoral quotas for women in local council elections (30 per cent) and legislative elections (currently at 26 per cent but not yet implemented) were a positive step. Additionally, in 2021, the Ministry of Women's Affairs took a leading role in developing and launching Palestine's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. If implemented, the action plan is perceived as a robust framework that could make a real difference for women's protection, participation and leadership.

However, overall the Palestinian Authority has been male-dominated and centralized in its decision-making from its inception. It continues to grapple with an inability to ensure broader participation, inclusivity and accountability to all of society. Despite playing crucial roles and having a significant impact on the ground, even after years of such work, women's roles generally do not seem to evolve into more official roles and influence at higher political levels and within political parties. The percentage of women in leadership and decision-making positions hovers around 11.7 per cent.¹¹ Out of 16 governors, only one is currently a woman. There are only three women out of 24 ministerial posts in the current cabinet.¹² Moreover, after Dr. Hanan Ashrawi's resignation last year, the Executive Committee of the PLO no longer has any women in its ranks. While the electoral quotas mentioned are a step in the right direction, women's organizations report an ongoing struggle to increase or maintain the

percentages at a minimum of 30 per cent (generally considered a "critical minority")¹³ while preventing reduction and roll-back of such gains. CEDAW, while adopted, remains highly controversial, seen by some as a foreign ("Western") imposed agenda. Meanwhile in Gaza under the de-facto authorities women too are almost entirely excluded from any form of political decision-making, and in February 2021 Gaza made headlines when a court ruled that women require permission from a male guardian to travel.¹⁴ The decision was quickly revised after backlash and outrage from women's and human rights organizations and some members of the international community,¹⁵ stating that the ruling violated the human rights of Palestinian women and breached Palestinian laws.

There is no lack of capable women who are ready to take on leadership levels, but there is still an overwhelming sense that within the dominant patriarchal structures and mindsets, they are considered less capable or judged for wanting to step out of the domestic sphere. There are reports of men, including young men, openly questioning women's rights and using arguments along the lines of "women are in fact privileged by the fact that they can stay at home and do not have to work outside the home".

Local women peacebuilders therefore face a situation of continually having to prove themselves and fight for their place in a public sphere that rarely expands beyond the local level. Many women are frustrated at the expectation that they fight as hard as men for their communities and the national cause, but at the same time are not fully taken seriously. They point out that a strong nation cannot be built when it is an uphill battle for every woman who tries to take part in the effort. Regardless of their personal political ambition or lack thereof, most women want to see themselves and their priorities reflected in their leadership and be sure that their perspectives and experiences are brought to the table. Absence of women in higher-level decision-making means that they have few allies, limited to no access and little to no say in issues that have a real impact on their everyday work, lives and futures, including the reconciliation process, the holding of elections, the approach to responding to and ending the occupation and future solutions for peace and security.

For more details on women's participation, see also UN Women's policy brief *A future at stake - Recommendations to include Palestinian women and youth in political and peace processes*.

Barrier 3 – Lack of funding

Women working at the local level are finding it difficult to get the support and resources they need to continue carrying out their crucial work. A UN Women analysis found that between 2011-2016 only 0.6 per cent of humanitarian funding allocated to the occupied Palestinian territory during that period were for projects targeting women's needs or gender equality (compared to around 4.5 per cent at the global level), and most of this funding was related to women's health and gender-based violence, not to strengthening their roles and leadership. It must be noted that globally, of bilateral aid targeting fragile countries from 2017-2018, an abysmal 0.2 per cent went directly to women's rights organizations.¹⁶ While no such data are available specifically for the Palestinian context, the situation does not look any better. Local women's groups point out that without financial resources, their ability to deliver concrete results for their communities is limited and therefore it becomes very difficult to solidify their position as key actors within their communities.

Women report attempts to get support from Palestinian decision-makers being rejected on the basis that their concerns are not considered priorities. However, even within the most limited resources and external limitations, duty bearers have options and a duty to mobilize and re-allocate resources in a way that promotes women's rights and equitable outcomes and is in line with the framework provided by the Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.¹⁷

On the part of the international community, most Member States have committed to the Grand Bargain framework, which provides detailed recommendations to better support and more strongly empower local and national responders. Its 2020 target stipulates that at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding should go to local and national responders as directly as possible and a localization marker to track this target should

be applied. Perhaps even more importantly, it prescribes fund flexibility to facilitate adaptation in response to community feedback; increased multi-year, collaborative and flexible planning and funding; and simplification and harmonization of reporting requirements by 2018, among other things.¹⁸

These issues are not new and mostly well-known to international partners. It is therefore hard for women to understand why the reality on the ground still looks so different. They report spending undue amounts of time applying, writing proposals and reporting for grants of as little as ten thousand dollars. Additionally, they experience processes that are still heavily top-down and donor-driven in terms of identifying priorities. While they know their communities and the needs on the ground, some struggle to find funding for the kind of work they want to do and end up implementing projects based on donor demand while struggling to implement their own priorities on the side and with very limited resources.

For women to truly lead and gain influence in their communities and beyond, they need to have both access to funding (without undue burden) and the authority to identify their own priorities and design their own responses. They also want to be able to implement activities on behalf of their own organizations and control their own work rather than doing the hard work, coming up with the local solutions but always on behalf of another party and with limited control over their work and budget.

In Closing

On top of all the above, women still have to break through persistent negative perceptions, restrictive social norms and attitudes, including from some young men. With all these constraints in place, it is not just women who are losing out. Local women peacebuilders have proven that they are intimately aware of community needs and are willing to work tirelessly to address them. But with the constant uphill battle, lack of access to resources, influence and dangers to their physical safety, there is a limit to what they can achieve.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The following recommendations are based on consultations with civil society members and other key informants (a list of key informants who were interviewed for the sake of developing this policy brief is included at the end as well as timeframe of the interviews). Key recommendations are also incorporated from the Grand Bargain framework since they were echoed by many of the informants. Recommendations are specified for key policymakers and duty bearers.

Palestinian Leadership

While the limitations it faces and the extraordinary position the government is in are understood, women and youth as rights holders need to be able to hold their leadership and those claiming to represent them accountable. The 2012 status change of Palestine to non-Member Observer State by the UN General Assembly allowed it to ratify international treaties, thereby officially taking on responsibility as a duty bearer.

Key recommendations:

1. To translate women's local roles into influence at higher levels, concerted efforts are needed to **open doors and**

communication channels that allow women access to decision-makers at the higher levels.

2. **Recognize local women's organizations expertise and knowledge** in responding to community needs in the context of crisis by enhancing their meaningful participation in decision-making.
3. Building on their key roles in local COVID-19 response, ensure **women are included in local and national COVID-19 response planning and decision-making**.
4. Institutionalize and **allocate resources** to women's local committees and organizations. As rights holders and strong contributors to their communities, their requests and demand cannot simply be dismissed as low priority.
5. Draw lessons from what women's organizations are doing that works well, identify what could be replicated and scaled up. Make sure **women's existing efforts inform official governance and decision-making**, including local and national governance.
6. **Support community-based approaches** that are women-led but rooted in communities, showcasing real benefits and result for the entire community.

International Community

Women consulted for this paper count on the international community to be champions for universal human rights, democracy, accountability and multilateralism. While appreciative of financial support, they are looking for more equal, participatory partnerships and funding arrangements that help them maximize the impact of their work.

Key recommendations:

1. Promote **accountability**. The number one priority expressed by women's organizations for them to be better supported in their work and efforts is increased political will to hold Israel accountable under international law. While women are doing everything they can to support their communities, there are limits to what they can do. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967 Michael Lynk in July 2021 implored the international community to take **meaningful accountability measures** to ensure that Israel complies with its legal obligations and indicated that "accountability has to rise to the top of the international community's agenda."¹⁹ Palestinian women would like to see a more results-oriented approach from the international community that provides actual lasting on-the-ground relief for them and their communities.
2. **Provide platforms** for women to share their stories. Women are overcoming great barriers and sometimes risking their lives to document their experiences. They need high-level platforms in order for their stories to be heard and for their efforts to have an impact.
3. Implement commitments made within the **Grand Bargain framework**, directing funding to local and national responders, simplifying application and reporting requirements, and using participatory processes.
4. While increased funding for women's local

organizations would be appreciated, the key issues flagged are that **funding needs to be accessible and flexible**.

5. A good practice example that can be followed and built on is the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, which among other things has the option to apply in Arabic, enough flexibility to define their own priorities, an explicit focus on women-led organizations and simplified reporting requirements.
6. **Recognize local women's organizations expertise and knowledge** in responding to community needs in the context of crisis, by consulting them on a regular basis, uplifting their voices in high level platforms and granting them seats at the table during planning processes.
7. Draw lessons from what women's organizations are doing that works well, identify what could be replicated and scaled up.
8. Support for women's participation and leadership is appreciated, but a more balanced and participatory approach is called for, supported by local analysis. Some women find that aspects of economic empowerment and traineeships for young women need to be included along with the more popular areas of gender-based violence work and legal reform.
9. **Support community-based approaches that are women-led** but rooted in communities and backed with sufficient funding, showcasing real benefits and result for the entire community. This strengthens women's position in the community and is found to be more effective than isolated activities or training.

Israel as the occupying power

While Israel rejects any obligations to the Palestinian people, it needs to be acknowledged as a key actor with great influence over Palestinian women's lives. Its obligations to Palestinians under international human rights conventions and humanitarian law have been recognized by the

UN General Assembly, CEDAW Committee, the UN Committee against Torture and International Court of Justice. UN Women's publication [International](#)

[Legal Accountability Mechanisms: Palestinian Women Living Under Occupation](#) discusses this topic in more detail.

KEY SOURCES CONSULTED

Primary sources:

In random order, the author would like to sincerely thank the following individuals for their valuable insights: Dr. Sahar Alkawasmeh, General Director, Roles for Social Change Association (ADWAR); Hala Morrar, Media and Advocacy Coordinator, The Palestinian Association for Empowerment and Local Development—REFORM; Amal Abusrour, Director of Programmes, Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC); Amal Tarazi, General Secretary, Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Palestine; Rima Nazzal, Writer and Member of the General Secretariat, General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW); Batoul Mufreh, Project Coordinator, General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) and Anjad Hithnawi, Development Coordination Officer, Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO).

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 <https://icanpeacework.org/2020/10/06/recognizing-women-peacebuilders-critical-actors-in-effective-peacemaking/>
- 3 Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, MBE. "Recognizing Women Peacebuilders: Critical Actors in Effective peacebuilding", ICAN, 2020
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Action Aid "From the ground up - women's role in local peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone", 2012.
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Sumud is a term that has taken on complex political meaning but is at its most basic level often translated as 'steadfastness' or 'perseverance'.
- 8 Including a range of women civil society leaders, activists, local peace builders and UN officials.
- 9 Area C is an Oslo II administrative division of the West Bank, defined as "areas of the West Bank outside Areas A and B". Area C constitutes about 61 percent of the West Bank territory; the area was committed in 1995 under Oslo II to be "gradually transferred to Palestinian jurisdiction", but such transfer did not happen. Source: "Area C and the future of Palestinian economy". World Bank, 2014.
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